DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 114 880 CS 501 166

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TITLE A Communi-site-ed Approach to Basic Speech in College.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 17p.; Unpublished study prepared at Rockland Community College, N.Y.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); Communication Skills; *Community Problems; Higher Education; Interpersonal Relationship; *Problem Solving; *School Community Cooperation; School Community Relationship; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

A communi-site -ed approach to speech fundamentals attempts to teach speech communication in interpersonal situations and to alert students to the importance of retaining democratic principles in a society which is pluralistic. It is assumed that college students need and desire the kind of learning whereby theory becomes functional in their lives. This approach engages students in the problem-solving process using a problem extant in their own community. A practical solution is explored and, finally, implemented in the community. The addition of such a project to the conventional teaching routines of lecturing and speechmaking will tend to encourage motivation, enhance communication skills, and develop stronger ties between classroom and community. A further expectation is that classroom and community will become mutual agents of change. (Author)

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a "Communi-site-ed" approach to basic speech

Beatrice M. Romano

Philip Werdell, cogent author on futurism in education, and co-inventor of the "facilitator" family of teaching and learning models, posits this characterization of the future of higher education: higher education "is best seen as an evolution of experimental forms attempting to support individual growth in order to create social understandings and skills necessary for democracy".[1] The statement places into perspective a core concern of speech teachers and researchers: how to make courses relevant. Always seeking ways to "touch" students affectively and cognitively, college instructors are persistent in their quest for methods of teaching that will establish vital connections between cognition and behavior. In today's diverse society the content of speech must include another dimension: provision for preparing the student to communicate effectively while living democratically in his environment which is also pluralistic. Specifications of course objectives in college should

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seek not only to enable students to use their communication capacities skillfully, but to use them in ways that will retain individual freedoms in a society in which person-to-person relationships are primary and necessarily co-operative.

The principle of responsible, energetic expression of ideas is basic to American ideals. Yet, a paradox seems evident when reality is viewed against the backdrop of current methods of teaching speech. The student, heir apparent, so to speak, to society's achievements, is, unwittingly, victim of a constantly inconstant society. The paradox lies in the fact that social and political change is initiated by "insiders" in the community while students, the "outsiders," watch freedom experienced and lived for them. Until the completion of his studies, the student is eclipsed, at least temporarily, into the role of "non-person." For this reason, engaging in communication rather than merely studying about communication should be the preferred practice rather than merely a hope for the truly democratic speech fundamentals class. Not to so "engage" students in communication is to risk grooming them for listener-assenter roles and not the role of initiator-participant in their society. The concern, then, is not so much with what is learned in the classroom as with what has

not been learned outside it.

Furthermore, the paradox gives way to a dichotomy in education itself. Too often, the milieu of the classroom and the world beyond it seem to share little. The business of communicating effectively necessitates that certain speech desiderata not be overlooked. Speaking out on issues, investigating social and political problems, and pursuing self-initiated courses of action to remedy them--these are the basic speech needs of students who would regard their first course in speech as meaningful for them. To ignore these needs is virtual abridgement of the freedoms guaranteed to peoples of a free society, and, in no small degree, an abrogation of one of the first responsibilities of speech teachers.

I would like to share something of a speech course offered at Rockland Community College, a communi-site-ed course which, experiential in nature, is centered in students' own local community. It endeavors to minimize the patent division between course content and experience, and designed for the fundamentals course since, except for those students whose major interest is speech communication, the first course in speech is likely to be the only speech course for which students will be enrolling. In this approach

to speech communication the student's own community provides for him those communication channels that are more likely to enhance interpersonal communication. From this approach a twofold effect may be anticipated: improvement in the skills of communication, and, concurrently, a beneficial effect in the community. Students "speak to" their community as communication principles are learned; the community, in turn, listens to its constituents enabling them to develop skills.

The following outline traces the method used to teach young and older adults who had returned to college. The classroom served as the base of operations for speechmaking assignments, lectures, and a community problem which required students to seek out a problem from their local county community to visualize a positive, viable solution for the problem, and then, to explore the problem by way of a problem-solving process with other members of the class. Finally, an appropriate plan of action was to be implemented. Students were told that just as the problem was to be initiated from a "real" source (i.e., within the community) so every possible resource was to be tapped for resolving the problem. The local media of print, press, radio, and cable television, as well as the various agencies on county and town levels, were to be consulted. A three-month time

limitation was imposed for the project's completion.

Class lectures were presented as needed during the regular two and one-half hour classes, and, as far as possible, were coordinated with the project proceedings. The class lecture on "interviewing" for instance, paralleled the interviewing phase of the project with class activities centering on role-playing the inverview situation. Small and large groups discussed the techniques of questioning possible for utilization in the project. Class lectures subsumed such topics as theory of communication, communication models, nonverbal communication, ethical considerations in communication, problem-solving techniques, and listening. Required class speeches and individual speeches delivered for the project were spaced over prescribed periods,prepared and practiced during classes.

Students were requested to submit community problems at the second class meeting following orientation to the course. The merits and objections for the problems were sifted out. Students felt that the steady rise of juvenile offenses had become threatening to their community. A determination of the problem was followed by threshing out tentative solutions. It was resolved that a request would be made to the Rockland County Legislature for the creation of a

County Youth Commission to be comprised entirely of young people--fourteen to nineteen years of age--to serve as advisors to already existing adult youth agencies. Hopefully the commission would serve as the "official voice" of the young people of Rockland. Aware that no precedent existed for such a commission on the county level, the class felt strongly that the concept would condition a positive step toward the amelioration of youthful problems, and satisfy the desire of today's youth to be "involved" in their government.

At this point in the discussions, most of the students had had a fair taste of interaction and decision-making through parleys with their families, friends as well as classmates. Somewhat enervated over setting up the groundwork for their cooperative venture, they nonetheless experienced genuine exhilaration at the prospect of becoming part of what they felt was to become an adventure in democratic participation.

Reactions to the idea of the class project ran the gamut from "It can't possibly be done--no one will listen" to "We can make it work." No student remained neutral. Pre-conceived notions about speech classes being "snap courses" precluded any possibility they would be

disinterested. Some felt the project had no place in a speech course, in particular the basic course. A few students were numbed at first at the prospect of doing a project more than opposed to it. Emotional reactions notwithstanding, it was only a matter of time before every student agreed to give the project a try.

The modus operandi was planned. Categories of activities or "phases" as they were called then were set up in designated time intervals. Project phases included: Exploration, the problem-seeking phase; Survey, interviews of community residents; Survey Report, the written report of interviewee and interviewer reactions over the problem. Every student participated in these three initial phases. At this juncture, students opted for one other committee from the list of remaining phases: Research, writing of a summary report of opinion and ideas sifted from the interviews, used as basis for arriving at two or three tentative solutions for the problem; Type Out: a reporting of the research committee's findings; Press: writing of releases for local radio, cable television, college radio, and local newspapers; Arts: producing collage, filmmaking, sculpting, staging plays, sketching cartoons, and exhibiting photographs which helped to dramatize the problem. The college radio station WRCC aired a panel

discussion of the problem. Local WRKL "Hotline" allowed airing the problem by a panel of students on the local community radio station, speaking directly with community residents. The CATV Debate Team debated the problem by way of local television media. Finally, the Presentation phase, consisting of the formal presentation of the project proposal was made before the Rockland County Legislature, the legal body authorized to create such Commissions.

To complete participation in the project each student was asked to submit his personal reactions to the project and to the course. Here are some typical responses: "This course has made me not only learn to speak but to listen--listening is a very important part of communicating"; "When I make a speech I still get as nervous as I used to, but I learned the importance of how one should stand when speaking. I don't like speech classes at all, but I do think the problem situation is a good idea--you should always have it in your class"; the class project really helped me overcome fear of speaking--if anything helped my composure, it was facing those cameras on cable TV"; "We all should have learned something from this project; one thing is you can clearly see all the problems that arise when a group such as ours

disagrees and fights the issues as excuses not to get involved--the project, in the end went exceedingly well considering the problems which seemed endless"; "Completing each phase was fulfillment in itself"; "We learned that from time to time you have to run up against a brick wall with public officials, but you can't stop striving".

It should be noted that the project idea was conceived as a starting point for experiencing communication on a reality level, and for facilitating a fresh awareness of the democratic processes available to students in their own environs. Therefore, a rather simplistic method of evaluation was employed. Students were graded by a cumulative point system for the major activities exclusive of the project, and for the project as well. If students satisfactorily: a) demonstrated enthusiasm over completion of their role in the project, b) demonstrated effort vis-a-vis group discussion over the problem, c) fulfilled their individual roles in the project, full credit was given. Almost every student showed genuine interest throughout, and with the exception of one or two, project phases were completed in the time allotted.

The actual creation of the commission came about

through continued efforts of a small number of students who contributed further their time and energy in the weeks which followed.

I have attempted to describe a teaching approach which resulted in what I felt was a positive step toward closing the gap between the goals of speech education and the persistent call of speech teachers for relevance. The paradigm outlined above helped to link the resources of the classroom, students, media and library facilities, with the resources of the community, citizens, politicos, media, and county administrators. It expedited a learning connection perhaps previously overlooked in the teaching of speech education--the "communi-site"-ed approach to the first course.

Given unique opportunities for active involvement in the domain of students' real concerns, it is felt that this approach conditions students for the intelligent exercise of freedom and, as important, effective cultivation of communication principles. Students are able to find, more readily, a self identity among members of their peer group as participants in problem-solving activities. Students become more aware of the significance of the nonverbal code in communication. They learn the importance of respecting differing points of view without

arousing negative emotions in themselves or others. Also, they recognize that the factors of family, race and closedmindedness place certain constraints on one's ability to communicate. The use and abuse of "power" in communication relationships is more graphically understood.

Is this approach a practical one for the fundamentals course? To be sure, not every community waits upon its student citizenry for the creation of a much-needed youth commission! But wouldn't most communities, recognizing their individual needs and requirements, delight in problem exploration and solution-finding by "its own," and with no added cost to the community?

If there is doubt regarding which areas would be fertile for task solution, we need only to look at current concerns of any given community. One class decided to request cosmetic improvement of a Sanitary Landfill Operation in the town in which they live. Their study of the problem indicated that members of their local town board had, some weeks before, already considered the problem and had voted to purchase trees and shrubbery to beautify the area. The class then agreed to reverse their "opposition" to the Board, and instead,

arranged speaking engagements throughout the county to publicly praise the action taken.

Much still needs to be accomplished in the area of human rights also. Local human rights agencies cry out for assistance in outlining and executing programs for the physically disabled. Students might wish to research specific areas of need, and speak to the appropriate legislative body to seek the reconstruction of all public entranceways in order to accommodate persons confined to wheelchairs.

Meeting some of the needs of older citizens in the community in terms of calling publicly for suitable housing for the aged might be a timely project on the town level.

Also business and professional people should be approached to elicit some fields of concern which would require public relations effort not otherwise possible.

Going back to the newly-created Youth Commission in Rockland County, an organizational task force will be needed to "advertise" more widely the purpose and objectives of the commission so that it is able to begin to effectuate its programs as quickly as possible. Students in the fundamental speech course could assume such a role for their class project, utilizing the media

to speak about the commission, and appearing before various groups as an information source to county residents.

Which problems would be ultimately considered would, of course, depend on student's own interests and the particular needs existing in his own community. The extent to which we, as teachers, invite our students toward deeper awareness of what is happening around them, to that degree, will the speech fundamentals course--such as the one described--serve the requirements of the times in which we are living as well as encourage the student to better understand who and what he is in relation to the world he lives in.

If relevant education is determined by student interests as well as needs, "hand and glove" coexistence between classroom and the community-at-large deserves the most serious consideration as the viable route to the development of communication skills and the advancement of students' emotions and intellect. Stated another way, the classroom becomes an extension of the community, and the community, an extension of the classroom. Each, in effect, <u>is</u> the other.

Indeed, Werdell's "future" provides perspective for higher education. In prospect, it is the teacher's

commitment to a more "involving" speech course for the student that will determine the eventual posture of speech in higher education.

Footnote

[1] Philip Werdell, "Futurism and the Reform of Higher Education," in Learning For Tomorrow: the Role of the Future in Education, ed. Alvin Toffler (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 285.

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Abstract

A "communi-site"-ed approach to speech fundamentals attempts to teach speech communication in "live" interpersonal situations, and to alert students to the importance of retaining democratic principles in a society which is pluralistic. It is assumed that college students need and desire the kind of learning whereby theory becomes functional in their lives. This approach engages the student in the problem-solving process using a problem extant in his own local community. A practical solution is explored, and finally, implemented in the community. The addition of such a project to the conventional teaching routines of lecturing and speechmaking will tend to encourage motivation, enhance communication skills, and develop stronger ties between classroom and community. A further expectation is that classroom and community will become mutual agents of change.